



6th Annual Housing Institute

*"Moving Forward Together... Finding Collaborative
Solutions in Permanent Housing"*

June 12 & 13, 2013

California Endowment Center

1000 N. Alameda St.

Los Angeles, CA 90012

**Problem-Solving/
Decision-Making
Process**

PROBLEM-SOLVING/DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Presenter:

Ervin R. Munro, M.S., Director of Social Services, Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Housing Corporation, Los Angeles, California

Type of Proposal: Basic Skills and Knowledge

Length: 1.5 Hours

Abstract:

This presentation is designed for Case Managers, Property Managers, Service Coordinators, Supervisors, Administrative Support Staff and others who work with clients/residents who often present with a wide range of needs AND who often want quick, unrealistic results. By learning a few basic techniques, the participants will be able to efficiently and effectively guide a person through a process leading to realistic goals that can be incorporated into an action plan. The role of the “helper” in this process is to guide the person toward a resolution rather than just saying what s/he *should do* to meet his/her needs. Utilizing this process to establish goals is a mutual endeavor between the two parties involved.

Learning Objectives:

- How to quickly assess a client’s/resident’s situation/needs
- How to guide a person through a defined problem-solving/decision-making process
- How to incorporate realistic goals into an Action Plan

Outline of Presentation:

Individuals working in the world of permanent supportive housing are often faced with addressing the needs of clients/residents who have been labeled as difficult, uncooperative, noncompliant, or unwilling to engage in activities or processes intended to be helpful to them. On the other hand, staff training has frequently been limited to learning some basic theoretical information about how important it is to “start where the person is at” and to develop a “care plan” to assist individuals with their needs. Although staff may know **WHAT** needs to be accomplished, they are often unsure **HOW** to go about the process in a systematic manner. From these concerns, a practical approach to problem-solving and decision-making has been developed with an emphasis on client/resident self-determination. Participants will learn specific strategies to guide residents through a process that saves time for the provider and helps the person to develop a practical plan of action. Through this cooperative approach, it has been demonstrated that clients/residents were more willing to implement their plans and meet with success leading toward self-sufficiency. Participants will learn some basic communication skills and be given a specific model to use with clients/residents during the “Problem-Solving/Decision-Making” process.

Biography:

Ervin R. Munro, M.S. is the Director of Social Services for SRO Housing Corporation in Los Angeles, California. He worked in the human-services field for over 35 years as an educator, licensed school psychologist, case manager, and a manager of case management services in a variety of settings. Mr. Munro has worked with a wide range of populations including persons with mental illnesses, substance users, elderly, veterans, homeless, runaway/throwaway youth, immigrants, and persons affected by HIV/AIDS. He serves as a trainer for dozens of social service agencies and has received numerous awards and commendations for his workshops. Mr. Munro was awarded the national 2011 Distinguished Alumni Award for Community/Regional Service by the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

What is a Relationship?

Relationships are established in a variety of ways, e.g. employer/employee, partners, husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend, roommates, client/case manager, physician/patient, friends, colleagues, etc. These “adult-to-adult” relationships are based on two primary elements: honesty and mutuality.

What do these two words mean in terms of a relationship? Let’s examine each and see how a violation of either element may seriously compromise the relationship.

1. Mutuality – means that **the relationship (adult-to-adult) between the two parties must be viewed as equal** as possible, i.e. neither party is considered to be inferior or superior to the other. Although we may be in different stations of life, each party strives to provide mutual regard and respect for the other. This is a very difficult process and often is violated through the use of words, condescending remarks, attitudes, behavior, body positions, and other methods. Let’s look at just a few examples that violate mutuality:

- a. Standing over another and talking down to him/her.
- b. Doing for others what they can do for themselves (especially without their permission), e.g. “Here, let me help you with that.” or “Here, let me do that for you.” Every time we do this, we relinquish the right of others to do for themselves—to make their own decisions. Further, we are teaching dependency and stifling self-reliance; assuming the other person is helpless; giving the message that we are better or can do better; assuming a role of control or superiority, etc. Help is NOT always helpful. Beware of the “helper” (controller, manipulator, etc.) who is always there to “take care of you”.
- c. Using words that the other person does not understand.
- d. Speaking to another in a condescending manner... “Well, I know how you are.”
- e. Making decisions on behalf of others.
- f. Making assumptions about another person.
- g. Using any kind of manipulative behaviors.

These are only a few examples of the violation of mutuality that we may exercise every day. Each time we do this, we compromise the integrity of the relationship. Often times the other person is not aware of any identifiable violation—they just know it doesn’t feel right. This frequently happens when control and superiority is disguised as “helping” the other person. “I’m doing this for your benefit.”—see what a nice person I am.

In addition to assuming an equal (adult-to-adult) relationship with the other person, mutuality means that there is **a free flow of information between the two parties involved**. If either party withholds information (or provides too much information), there is an imbalance in the relationship and mutuality is violated. If, for example, I fail to give you pertinent information so that I may have better control of a situation, I have violated mutuality. If I ask you a lot of questions about yourself and fail to give you any information about myself, I have created an information imbalance. This creates discomfort and violates mutuality.

2. Honesty – means that **the information shared between the two parties involved must be without distortion or deception.**

Distortion

If either party distorts the information for their own gain, they have violated mutuality. For example, I may want to befriend you. So I tell you some things about myself including a few “white” lies. Later, you ask me about a certain situation I had told you—one of my little white lies. Now I have two choices: either continue the lie and attempt to remember all of the details or tell the truth. If I continue the lie, not only do I have to live with my own dishonesty, sooner or later my details are not going to match up. If I tell the truth, I have seriously undermined your trust in me. Distortion of information is a very dangerous game in a relationship and should be avoided at all costs.

Deception

Sometimes we might want to deceive the person we are establishing a relationship with. We might have a “hidden agenda” and therefore give out information, or take actions, with an “intent” that is different from what the other person understands. For example, you may want to have sex with someone; so you invite the person to go out with you to a dinner, a movie and/or some drinks. The hidden agenda is that afterwards, the person will feel obligated to go home with you.

Or perhaps, you want to give a false image of who you really are. Therefore, you may provide information in such a manner as to mislead the person. This too is deceptive and violates the element of honesty.

False relationships

A violation of either element (mutuality and honesty) will seriously compromise the integrity of a relationship. If a relationship is to continue in good-standing, it will always be necessary to go back and fix any violations. A relationship that continues in the presence of a violated element is not a positive, healthy relationship.

An unhealthy relationship may be the result of a forced necessity, a fear, an illusion, a false hope, or something else but it is not a positive, healthy relationship. Perhaps a person has a strong need for love and will suffer through emotional and/or physical abuse to be with another person; perhaps there is a need to have money available; perhaps there are children involved in the relationship; perhaps there is the fear of losing one’s job; perhaps a client is fearful they will lose their services; perhaps one person knows something that is detrimental to another and holds it over his/her head. The possibilities are unlimited. In any case, if you are in a false relationship, do whatever is necessary to remedy the situation as soon as possible.

One-Way vs. Two-Way Communication

Communication is simply the exchange of information between individuals. It happens in many different ways from simple smiles, to gestures, body positions, words we say (or not say), touch, things we write, drawings, paintings, music, etc. In general, we do a fairly good job of effectively communicating with each other considering all of the possibilities there are for misinterpretation. However, for any of us who feel we have been misunderstood or just haven't been heard, we know how difficult communication can sometimes be. However, with a little practice, we can improve our communication skills. First, let's talk about two common methods of "verbal" communication—one-way and two-way communication.

One-Way Communication

Speaker -----(talks at)-----→ Listener

One-way communication is when we talk "at" people. It is often used in casual, social conversation. This type of communication does not require the listener to necessarily respond to the speaker in any substantive manner. The listener may respond on an intermittent basis by simply smiling, nodding, giving short expressions (oh, huh, really, exactly, no kidding, etc.) and looking at the speaker. This method of listening is often referred to as "passive listening". For example, if we ask a person "What's happening?", they will often continue to talk "at" us as long as we give short, intermittent responses of some sort. One-way communication is an effective type of social conversation which allows the speaker to vent or share information. However, sometimes the person may want help addressing a particular concern or problem. When entering into the problem-solving/decision-making process, using two-way communication is usually a more effective method.

Two-Way Communication

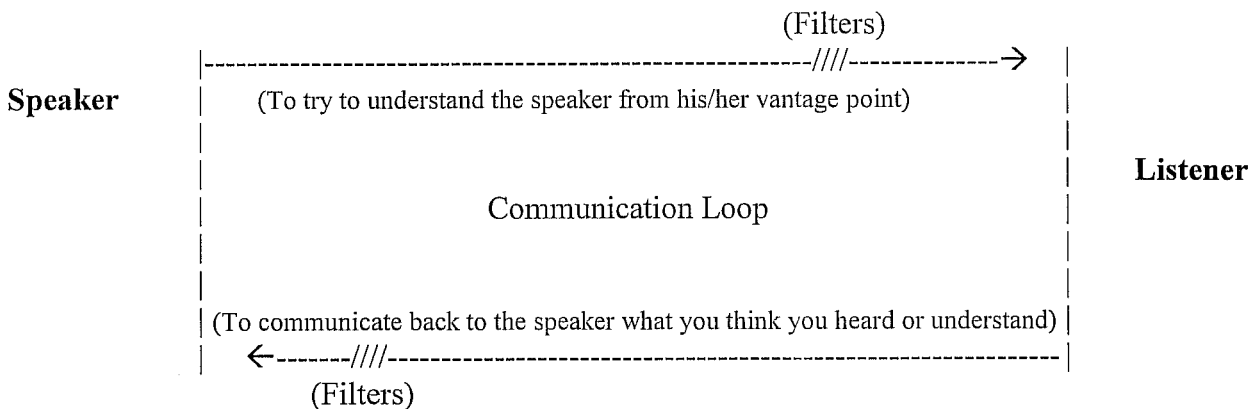
Speaker <----- (talks with) -----→ Listener

Two-way communication is a much more complex process and demands a great deal more from the listener. This method of communication is often referred to as "active listening" because it actively engages both the speaker and the listener. Two-way communication means we are talking "with" each other rather than "at" each other.

Responsibilities of the Listener

There are two primary responsibilities of the listener during two-way communication:

1. To try to understand the speaker from his/her vantage point, and
2. To communicate back to the speaker what we think we heard or understand.



Filters

Attempting to meet these two responsibilities is a very difficult process. Our knowledge and experiences are very different from that of the speaker. As the speaker talks to us, we attempt to relate to the person by comparing the information provided to our own knowledge and experiences. The speaker's words pass through our "filters" that represent our own knowledge and experiences. These filters are all of the things that make us up, i.e. our values, race, gender, age, belief systems, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, geographic upbringing, political affiliations, religious/spiritual beliefs, education, and all our experiences—both good and bad. As a consequence, the information provided by the speaker becomes distorted as we attempt to relate our experiences to the words being said. These filters that are used during the communication process are often referred to as "interference factors". It is critical that the listener is aware of this interference and makes every attempt to hear what the speaker is saying, from his/her vantage point, and avoid converting the speaker's words into our own experience. This is a very difficult feat.

It is often times said that "no two people ever read the same book" or that "no two people ever watch the same movie". As we read a book, we relate to the written words using our own knowledge and experiences—our own personal references. Each person's response to the words will be different. Consequently, we are reading the book from a different vantage point than another person. In fact, we know as we grow and develop, that if we read the same book a few years later, it will be different. This is because our knowledge and experiences have changed over time and we now reference the words differently.

Understanding the Other Person

Attempting to understand another person from his/her vantage point is an extremely difficult process and we could never reach a true understanding of the other person's situation. Even persons who have had "common experiences" have had very different experiences. It would be impossible for us to have had the same experience. Think about such things as going to a concert, experiencing an earthquake, driving a car for the first time, going to school, getting married, drinking with friends, the death of a parent, flying in an airplane, etc. None of these experiences could be the same for every person. Those who have had common experiences often make assumptions about the other person's experience. Making assumptions is a reckless approach to communication and it often leads us away from understanding the other person. Our attempt as a listener should be to try to get inside the person and see the world through his/her eyes—not ours. Most importantly, **"Do not make assumptions"** about the other person's experiences.

Communicating our Understandings to a Person

If trying to understand isn't hard enough, after we've heard what the speaker told us, we now have to **communicate back to the person what we think we heard or understand**. We might say something to the effect, "So what you're telling me is that _____" or "Let me see if I understand what you are saying. You're telling me _____. Is that right?" Often times the speaker will respond, "No, no, no that's not what I'm saying. What I'm trying to say is _____". Consequently, we may have to keep repeating the information back and forth to each other until we come to a common agreement on what is being said. Repeating this information back to the speaker is critical to ensure we are on the same frequency. If we don't verify what the speaker is saying, or make assumptions, we may be completely off base and not know the difference. This is not helpful to the speaker, nor the listener, and it leads to much confusion. Not only do we have filters that interfere with the communication process, so does the speaker. This too has to be taken into consideration. It's amazing that we can communicate at all with so much interference going on and so many possibilities for misunderstanding. Some how we manage to bungle through the process—although not always very effectively.

Is it a Behavior or a Label?

Please put a “B” or an “L” in front of each of the following:

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------|
| ___ depressed | ___ ridiculous |
| ___ mean | ___ laughing |
| ___ shouting | ___ arguing |
| ___ angry | ___ stealing |
| ___ smoking | ___ irritating |
| ___ slamming doors | ___ pounding fist on door |
| ___ disrespectful | ___ promiscuous |
| ___ argumentative | ___ lazy |
| ___ eating | ___ running |
| ___ disrobing | ___ spitting |
| ___ fighting | ___ drunk |
| ___ outrageous | ___ runs in and out |
| ___ disruptive | ___ crazy |
| ___ jerk | ___ talking loudly |
| ___ crying | ___ old |
| ___ obnoxious | ___ discourteous |
| ___ rude | ___ happy |
| ___ uncooperative | ___ sad |
| ___ washing hands | ___ filthy |
| ___ kicking | ___ liberal-minded |

What is Behavior?

In general, **behavior** is only two things. Either the person “said” something or “did” something. Most everything else that we use to describe behavior is really labeling behavior rather than identifying behavior. **Behavior** is observable and measurable.

Labels are the conclusions we draw from observing behavior, e.g. if I observe someone moving slowly, holding her head down, and talking slowly with slurred words, I may say, “She is depressed.” When in fact, she may be over-medicated, ill, tired, emotionally distraught, under the influence, etc. We don’t know what is causing her to behave in the manner she is, only that she is moving slowly, holding her head down, and talking slowly with slurred words.

Remember, a behavior is observable and measurable. If you can’t see it or hear it, it probably doesn’t exist. A label is a conclusion you have made about an observation. For example, if we say, the client fell down three times in a ten-minute period, that “behavior” is observable and measurable. However, if we say the person was “drunk”, that is not observable or measurable. Therefore, “drunk” is a label. From this description, we do not know what caused the person to fall down. S/he may or may not be drunk.

Sometimes, we also personalize and emotionalize behavior. For example, a client may walk down the hallway and spit on the floor. The Janitor just finished mopping the floor and becomes very angry, throws his mop on the floor, and starts yelling at the client, calling him a series of bad things.

The Janitor may have **personalized** the client’s behavior if he felt that the client did this “despicable” act just to spite him. It is as if the client woke up this morning and thought, “I’m going to go downstairs and spit on the floor in front of the Janitor just to make him angry today.” The Janitor acts as if this event occurred exclusively for him.

The fact that the Janitor also reacted angrily to the event means that he **emotionalized** the behavior/event. He chose the feelings he wanted in order to respond to the event. We are in charge of our own feelings. The Janitor could have selected other responses/feelings such as ignoring the behavior, reporting the behavior to the Case Manager, cleaning up the mess and moving on, reporting it to the Housing Manager, etc. However, he chose to react to the behavior and he chose negative feelings.

Behavior – anything that an organism does involving action and response to stimulation.

Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary

PROBLEM-SOLVING/DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4	STAGE 5
WHAT	HOW	WHAT	HOW	WHAT
Define the situation.	Determine the emotional response to the situation.	List options/alternatives/possibilities/ideas to address situation.	Assess the response to each alternative/option/possibility.	Select the best alternative to address the situation.
"What's happening?" What's going on?" "What do you need?" What's on your mind?" "What would you like to talk about?"	"How are you feeling?" How does that make you feel?" How are you doing?" "How did you deal with that?"	"What have you done about it already?" "What do you see as a possibility?" "If you could change anything what would you do?" "What do you think would work in this situation?"	"How do you feel about that idea?" "How does that possibility work for you?" "How does this option differ from that one?" "How do you think this alternative will work in your situation?"	"What would you like to do about it?" "What do you think is the best option for you?" "What alternative are you most comfortable with?" "What would you like to try in your situation?"
Defining Situation		Exploring Options		Selecting Alternative

The alternatives selected become the "goals" that the person chooses to take in order to resolve the situation.

Words to Avoid When Problem-Solving

Often times in a casual, social conversation, we use words without much thought to their consequences. However, when talking with persons who are attempting to solve problems, the use of certain words becomes more critical. Throughout the problem-solving/decision-making process, it is important that we not inhibit the process by using language that may appear to be judgmental or lead the person to believe that we are imposing our ideas or solutions on them. Therefore, we can enhance the communication process by removing some of our favorite words and phrases. Here are some of the most common:

1. **Why?** - The reason why we don't ask "Why" is because it:

Infers Judgment, e.g. "Why did you do that? Why did you get into that situation? Why would you want to do that?" Because a trusting relationship is based on honesty and mutuality, it is important that we avoid putting ourselves in a role of superiority by asking judgmental questions. Questions of this nature, often violate mutuality and puts the person on the defensive.

Demands an Explanation. Even if the person could explain his or her current situation, nothing would have changed about the situation after the explanation. It would still be the same situation several hours later. Avoid your temptation to be voyeuristic and want to know all of the gory details of someone's past. Focus on the present and "define the situation". Although some background history may be necessary to understand a situation, it is not necessary to retrace the entire life history of each and every person in the scenario. This is just plain nosiness.

Explanations are not resolutions. Resolutions demand that we process through a problem—not just talk "about" the problem.

A good substitute for "why" is "for what reason". Although it asks the same question, it doesn't appear as demanding and judgmental, e.g. "For what reason would you choose this possibility as opposed to that one?" Remember to flatten your intonation when asking the question.

2. **...but...** - Using the word "but" to continue the conversation with a person tends to discount what the person has just said, e.g. "Well I hear what you are saying but I think you should...". An alternative is to substitute the word "but" with the word "and", e.g. "I hear what you are saying and I've thought of some other ideas we might consider." or you may simply start another sentence and omit the word "but", e.g. "There may be some other alternatives we can look at also. Let's see if we can talk about this further and add to the list." Whatever you do, try to keep your "but" out of the other person's situation.
3. **I think...** - This expression immediately suggests that you are going to impose your agenda on the speaker. "I think" is often followed by what the person should do. Whose "should" is this? It's yours. By saying "I think", we immediately place ourselves in a superior position—which is a violation of mutuality in the relationship. Avoid providing "I think" responses unless they are specifically solicited. Even then, we need to present our responses with great caution.
4. **You should...** - What does this expression tell you? That's right! It dictates to the speaker what s/he "should do" based on what works for you and your particular values and beliefs. It doesn't, in any way, guarantee that the suggested solution will work for the other person. Yes, and once again, it puts you in the position of knowing everything. What happened to mutuality and processing? Avoid "you should" statements whenever possible.

Every time we give our solutions to others we deny them the right to find their own. **Do not do for others what they can do for themselves.** This takes power away from others and it assumes that they are unable to do for themselves. Be careful not to relinquish the other person's right to choose—keep your quick fixes to yourself and afford the person an opportunity to find his/her own solution. Avoid teaching dependency—rather provide opportunities to empower the person by allowing them to make their own decisions leading toward great self-sufficiency.

5. **I understand** - First of all, we could never fully understand another person's situation. We're not in it. Secondly, it tends to trivialize what the speaker is telling us as if to say, "Yeah, yeah, I know all about that—don't bother me with the details." Also, "I understand" often times means in social conversation to "shut up". Haven't you heard people say, "Yeah, yeah, I understand (person puts his/her hand up in a stop position) but what I think you should do is ...". To avoid giving the person the perception that you are telling him or her to shut up or are not interested in what they are saying, avoid using "I understand". You might say, "Let me see if I'm understanding what you are saying (state your understanding); or, "Help me understand that... can you tell me more about that?" "I think I'm understanding... are you saying such and such?"
6. **That's right or that's wrong...** - Once again it puts us in position of judgment; a position of superiority. We want to avoid judging what the speaker is saying and try to understand what s/he is saying from his/her particular vantage point. Judgment only impedes the communication process. It puts the speaker on the defensive and soon s/he will censor the conversation to those things s/he thinks the listener wants to hear. Again, in social situations, we often judge what the person is saying by grunts, verbalizations, facial expressions, body language, etc., e.g. "Really?, I can't believe it!, That's terrible!, That's great!, You're kidding!, How could that have happen!? We might use looks of surprise, frown, throw up our hands, etc. all suggesting we are judging what the person is saying.

Try to view the person's situation as simply different from yours rather than right or wrong. It is not our responsibility to change the person to be the same as us; nor to believe that our ideas are the only ones that are true and correct. **It is what it is and it will be what it will be.**

7. **Avoid a "preface" or "explanation" to a statement**, e.g. "I'm not a bigot but...; It isn't that I don't mind working with women but..."; or after you've already stuck your foot in your mouth, you state,... "Well, what I was really trying to say was..." These tags on a statement often times indicate that what follows or preceded the tag was not true. Just make the statement without any tags before or after it. If you need to qualify or explain the statement, perhaps it would have been better unsaid.
8. **Avoid using clichés and figurative language** - Very often clichés trivialize what is being said and contribute little to the conversation, e.g. simply say, "yes" instead of repeating words like "yeah, right on, you got it, I hear ya, really, positively, totally, excellent, definitely, affirmative, exactly," etc.

Some other vogue phrases that take the place of conversation include whatever, like, you know, you know what I mean, to tell the truth, actually, cutting edge, not to worry, no brainer, go for it, fast-track, on the same page, bottom line, drill down, hands-on, on a roll, power-anything, read my lips, world class, no problem (which usually is, thus raising false hope), etc., etc. These phrases are vague and ambiguous, say less annoying, and leave matters to personal interpretation.

9. **Avoid making comments that raise false hopes or give false encouragement.** This is especially true when talking with a person who has a serious illness, has experienced a major trauma, or may have a potentially terminal illness. We would want to avoid statements like “buck up, cheer up, don’t worry it will all work out, everything will be better soon ... don’t make such a big deal about it”. We cannot guarantee the outcome of another person’s situation nor do we want to trivialize it by making a mundane “hope” statement.

The listener’s ability to convey the fact that s/he is interested in the person speaking, as well as the problem and its solution, often is proof enough that things may get better just knowing there is support and an empathetic ear.

10. **Avoid labels and group-specific language** – Labels are often used to hurt, judge or distance ourselves from others. Labels don’t provide useful information to the other person and it sets up a situation of speculation—often in the negative. What do we mean when we say he’s conservative, he’s a drug addict, AIDS victim, she’s in denial, she’s Black, they’re Catholics, he’s Latino, they’re all Jews, homosexuals, he’s depressed, nerd, crack head, queer, etc. These “buzzwords” are often times used in an offensive manner and may cause a negative emotional reaction.

We all belong to different groups, professions, organizations, etc. As a consequence, we often learn a language that is specific to our particular group. However, when we talk with others, they don’t necessarily know what we mean by certain words, acronyms, in-house jokes, etc. Attempt to be inclusive in the conversation rather than using language that alienates people.

11. **Avoid starting a sentence with the word “no” or using negatives** – Try to reword your statement to begin with a positive, i.e. tell the person what you CAN do as opposed to what you CAN’T do. Example: “No, we don’t do that here. No, I can’t help you with that.” Instead, the conversation may go something like this, “Oh okay, I hear what you need. (Repeat the need). Let me give you a number where you can talk to someone about that.” It’s unnecessary to explain what you can’t do. It only frustrates the person further and may escalate a situation. Also, avoid saying the usual negative cliché statements, e.g. “No problem; Don’t forget...; No, I agree; etc.” Substitute with, “I’ll take care of it; Please remember; Yes, I agree.”
12. **Avoid interpreting the conversation** – “Oh yeah, I’ve heard about that before. I think it’s probably because of such and such.” People usually want only to share their story with you and they are not necessarily asking that you interrupt every few sentences to offer an explanation to what they are saying. Ask yourself, “For what reason am I doing this?” “What is the purpose of my interpretation/speculation?”
13. **Avoid sharing your own personal stories.** Your responsibility as a listener is to try to understand what the person is telling you from his/her vantage point—not to impose your own personal stories on them. Your stories may confuse the other person and/or complicate the situation even further. Again, ask yourself for what reason are you telling the person this information.

NOTES:

